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"I am their music."

THE MUSIC FROM BEHIND THE MOON

An Epitome

by

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

With Eight Wood Engravings by
LEON UNDERWOOD

Judge thou the lips of those that rose up against me, and their devices against me all the day. Behold their sitting down, and their rising up: I am their music

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For

CARL VAN VECHTEN

whatever hereinafter
he may like

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PART ONE

of Madoc in His Youth

—De grâce, belle dame, si je puis vous demander ce que j'ai à cœur de savoir, dites-moi pourquoi vous êtes assise ici toute seule?

—Je vais te le dire, mon pauvre Madoc, avec franchise.

❧ I: *The Text from Genesis*

To such as will to listen I plan here to tell the story of Madoc and some little part of the story of Ettarre.

Now, this is a regrettably familiar tale. It may possibly have begun with Lamech, in the Book of Genesis—who was, in any event, the first well-thought-of citizen upon known record to remark, "I have slain a young man to my hurt!" And poets tell us that since then a many poets whose bodies had survived to middle age have repeated this glum observation, although probably not ever, since then, to their co-partners alike in the homicide and in married life.

Moreover, this is a regrettably inconclusive tale, without any assured ending. Nor is there any assured prophesying, either, that the next thousand years or so will remedy that defect in this tale, because the story of Ettarre is not lightly to be ended by the death of any woman's body which for the while Ettarre is wearing.

And, lastly, this is a regrettably true tale.

This Madoc was the youngest and the least promising of the poets about the cultured court of Netan, the High King of Marr and Kett. When it was Madoc's turn to take out his bronze harp from its bag of otter-skin, and to play at a banquet, he assisted nobody's digestion. And, as the art-loving King would put it, twisting half-fretfully at his long white beard, what else was the lad there for?

The best-thought-of connoisseurs declared the songs of Madoc to be essentially hollow and deficient in, as they phrased it in their technical way, red blood: to which the wives and sweethearts of these connoisseurs were only too apt to reply that, anyhow, the boy was quite nice-looking. The unthinking women thus confirmed the connoisseurs in their disapproval.

But the strangest matter of all, in a world where poets warm themselves mainly by self-esteem, was that not even to young Madoc did his songs appear miraculous. To Madoc's hearing his songs ran confusedly, and seemed the parodies of an elvish music, not wholly of this earth, some part of which he had heard very long ago and had half forgotten, but the whole of which remained unheard by any mortal ears.

III: *The Woman Like a Mist*

Now, upon a May evening, when a plump amber-colored moon stayed as yet low behind the willows in the east, this same young Madoc bathed with an old ceremony. Thereafter he sat beside the fountain meditatively disposing of his allotted portion of thin wine and of two cheese-sandwiches. A woman came to him, white-limbed and like a living mist in that twilight.

"Hail, friend!" said Madoc.

She replied, with hushed and very lovely laughter, "I am not your friend."

He said, "Well, peace be with you, in any event!"

She answered, "There is for you, poor Madoc, no more peace now that I have come to you all the long way from behind the moon."

And then that woman did a queer thing, for she laid to her young breasts her hands, and from the flesh of her body she took out her red heart, and upon her heart-strings she made a music.

It was a strange and troubling music she made there in the twilight, and after that slender mist-like woman had ended her music-making, and had vanished as a white wave falters and is gone, then Madoc could not recall the theme or even one cadence of her music-making, nor could he put the skirling of it out of his mind. Moreover, there was upon him a loneliness and a hungering for what he could not name.

Therefore Madoc comes to the dark and ivy-covered tower of Jonathas the Wise.

The lean and kindly man put forth his art. He burned, in a tall brazier, camphor and sulphur and white resin and incense and salt: he invoked the masters of the lightning and of volcanoes and of starlight, and he recited the prayer of the Salamanders.

Then Jonathas sighed, and he looked compassionately over his spectacles. "The woman that troubles you is the pallid witch Ettarre, whom the three Fates that learned persons call Norns have ordained to live with Sargatanet, Lord of the Waste Beyond the Moon, until the 725 years of her poisonous music-making are ended."

Madoc said, "How may a struggling poet avoid the spells of this witch and of this wizard?"

Jonathas replied: "There is for a poet no defense against their malice, because their weapon is that song which is an all-consuming fire. Still, as one nail drives out another nail, and as one fire consumes another, so something may be done against the destroying pair with this."

And thereupon, lean kindly Jonathas gave to young Madoc a very large quill pen fashioned out of a feather which had fallen from the black wings of Lucifer, the Father of All Lies.

❧ V: *One Patriot's Reward*

With this pen Madoc began to write down his songs before he sang them: and the pen made for him a new kind of song.

Now the connoisseurs nodded approval. "The sentiment is wholesome, and, in these degenerate days, regrettably rare." King Netan clapped his hands, he laughed aloud, and he gave Madoc a greyhound, a white tunic worked with green embroidery, and seven chests of gold coin.

Thereafter Madoc lacked for no reward, and every week he had a lovelier lady for his love. At all the royal banquets he sang his new song, of how enviable were Netan's people in every heritage and in their sturdy racial qualities, and of how contemptible the other nations appeared in comparison: and everybody applauded his remarkable rightness.

But Madoc one day put aside his harp, he removed an amorous countess from about his neck, and he went out of Netan's shield-hung hall. All at that banquet were applauding Madoc; but through the shouting he could hear a skirling music which derided his patriotic perjuries: and Madoc knew that the fatherland he was praising showed as an unimportant pimple on the broad face of the world, and that its history, or the history of any other people, was but a very little parenthesis in earth's history.

So Madoc fled from the cultured court of Netan, where the superb emotions of patriotism were denied him by that music which a pallid and pestiferous witch was devising in the Waste Beyond the Moon. He fled southward into the land of Marna.

In a green field, beneath a flowering apple-tree, a young woman was playing at chess against a veiled opponent. His face could not be seen, but the gray hand with which he now moved a bishop had four talons like the claw of a vulture. The woman was clothed in blue: about her yellow hair she wore a circlet of silver inset with many turquoises, and about her wrists also were bands of silver.

At the sight of Madoc this woman arose, she smiled, and in a clear sweet voice she cried out the magic word of the south, saying, "Berith!" The veiled man was no longer there: beyond the apple-tree you saw a gray wolf running away very swiftly.

The lovely girl then told young Madoc that she was Ainath, the queen over all this country, and he told her that he was a wandering minstrel. Ainath in reply said she did not know much about music, but she knew what she liked, and among the things that she especially liked was the appearance of Madoc.

Nor did Madoc dislike the appearance of Ainath. Nowhere in her appearance could he find any flaw: she was, indeed, so confident of her perfection that she hid from him no portion of her loveliness, and she refused to cheat him by leaving his knowledge superficial.

Her generosity and her fond loving ways led Madoc quite to overlook, if not entirely to condone, this queen's alliance with the Old Believers, when Madoc by and by had found out the nature of Ainath's veiled opponent and what game it was that Ainath played. Meanwhile with Madoc she played other games, night after night, inside the carved and intricately colored sarcophagus in which, when the time came, Queen Ainath must be laid away under the dark and fertile land of Marna; for it was the intent of this far-seeing queen to make of her coffin a hospitable place, and to endear it with memories of countless frolics and of much loving friendship, so that (when the time came) she might lie down in her last home without any feeling of strangeness or any unwelcome association of ideas.

Now it was Madoc who, for the while, assisted Ainath in this poetic, wise plan, and he set lovingly to work to keep that coffin dear to her.

VIII: *Reward of the Optimist*

Now also, for Queen Ainath, and for the shepherds who served Ainath, young Madoc wrote noble songs. It was not of any local patriotic prevarications that Madoc sang in the green fields of Marna, but of an optimism which was international and all-embracing.

"This is a fair world," sang Madoc, "very lovingly devised for human kind. Let us give praise to the excellence of this world, and—not exactly this morning, but, it may be, to-morrow afternoon—let us be doing exceedingly splendid things in this world wherein everything is ordered for the best!"

The kindly shepherd people said, as they cuddled each other in pairs, "This Madoc is the king of poets, sweetheart, for he makes us see that, after all, this world is a pretty good sort of place."

But Madoc looked with dismay upon their smirking faces, which seemed to him beneath their hawthorn garlands as witless as were the faces of their sheep: and upon the face of Madoc there was no smirk. For all the while that he made this comfortable music he could hear another music, skirling: and that music derided the

wholesome optimism which was in the singing
but not in the parched heart of Madoc,
and it called him, resistlessly,
toward his allotted
doom.

"This is a fair world."

PART TWO

of Madoc in This World

Je t'ai secrètement accompagné partout, dans les luttes et dans les combats, sur les routes, dans les rues et partout : ma musique t'a préservé des atteintes et des agréments et des illusions du monde.

IX: *"The Bravest Are the Tenderest"*

Madoc fled from the shepherd land, and from the hospitable coffin of Queen Ainath, wherein optimism was denied him. Now he goes westerly, into the mountainous country of the Emperor Pandras.

There Madoc encountered a gleaming company of archers and of spearmen with red lions blazoned upon their shields. Their Emperor rode before them, in red armor, mounted upon a roan stallion: and they went thus marching to make war against the people of Ethion, as was their annual custom.

"Our old traditions and our national honor must be preserved," declared the Emperor, "but, nevertheless, this year a war is rather inconvenient."

Then Madoc sang the newest song which he had made with his black pen. He sang very movingly of how many young men would be killed in the impending war, and of how this fact would be a source of considerable distress to their mothers.

The spearmen and the archers dropped each a tear from each eye: the Emperor himself was heard to clear his throat.

"I have a mother," said one warrior.

His neighbor replied: "I have not. But I formerly had one, and the principle is the same."

They agreed that the principle was excellent, a retreat was sounded, and the impending war was deferred.

X: *Philanthropy Prospers*

Then Madoc made yet other songs for the war-loving people of the Emperor Pandras. He made fine stirring songs about philanthropy, and many simple chanteys such as workmen use at their labors.

The warriors turned from their belligerent raids, to the building of schoolhouses and hospitals and public drinking-fountains and domed temples for their three national deities. Laboring, the warriors sang the songs which Madoc made, and these songs put a new vigor in them: their philanthropic endeavors went forward the more nimbly because of Madoc's songs.

"Build," Madoc sang, "for the welfare of those who come hereafter! Create for them a fairer and more enlightened world! Build, as becomes the children of the great Builder!"

But in a while he heard another music: he reflected how stupid were these perspiring and large-muscled persons who toiled for the welfare of a problematic and, it well might be, unmeritorious posterity, for people who had done nothing whatever to place anybody under any obligations: and his songs which brought benevolence and vigor into the living of other persons appeared to Madoc rather silly, now that again he heard the skirling music of Ettarre.

"Build," Madoc sang.

❧ XI: *The Comfortable Music*

Just so it fared with Madoc in many kingdoms. He wandered everywhither, writing noble songs with his black pen. He sang these songs before great notabilities, before the Soldan of Ethiopia under a purple awning worked with silver crescents, and before the Pope of Rome in a white marble room quite empty of all furnishing, and before the Old Man of the Mountains beside a fire in a grove of fir-trees at midnight. Everywhere people of every estate delighted in Madoc's song-making.

Wheresoever Madoc sang, though it were in a thieves' pot-house or in the dark cell of a prison, his comfortable music was a spur to the magnanimity of his hearers. They overflowed forthwith with altruism and kindliness and every manner of virtue which was not too immediately expensive: they loved their fellows, upon no provocation detectable by Madoc: and they exulted to be the favored children and the masterworks of Whoever happened to be their tribal god, in a universe especially designed for their occupancy.

And Madoc envied everywhere the amiable notions which he provoked but might not share. For always when his music soared at its most potent he heard the skirling of another music, which was all a doubtfulness and a discontent.

Yet, as it seemed, no other person heard that skirling music. No other person willed to hear a music which doubtfulness and discontent made over-poignant. They thronged, instead, to hear the sugared and the grandiose music which Madoc peddled, and which, like a drug, buoyed up its hearers with self-approval as concerned the present and with self-confidence as touched what was to come.

They listened, and they grinned complacently, who were —the kings and the archbishops and the barons and the plowmen alike—each one of them already a skeleton and a grinning death's-head so very thinly veiled with flesh and hair. They grinned, while at the feet of each lay crouched the inescapable gloom of his shadow, to serve as an ever-present reminder of that darkness which would presently leap and devour him. Meanwhile each listened to the bedrugging music which Madoc peddled: and every heart made of red, moving dust, upon a brief vacation from the lawns and gutters of earth, was exulting. It troubled Madoc whenever he heard any of his hearers talk exaltedly about the songs which Madoc made with his black quill, and it troubled Madoc that not any of the noble songs which he was making could ever wholly shut from Madoc's ears the skirling music of Ettarre.

XIII: *Leads to a Lizard*

Therefore he went to Maya of the Fair Breasts. Before her at that instant stood an amber basin with green stones set about the rim of it. Inside this basin was the appearance of a shining lizard with very red, protuberant eyes which moved and glittered as the panting creature whispered to Dame Maya about that which was to come.

When Madoc came, the wise woman arose and put aside her cold, familiar counsellor. She went toward young Madoc with a light of wooing in her proud and quiet face. He found her lovely, but he said nothing about this. Instead, before her kindling gaze, he looked downward. Thus it was that Madoc saw the lizard creature had put on the appearance of a tiny silver-colored pig. As Madoc looked, this pig became a little horse, and then a sheep, and after that an ox, drifting out of one dwarfed bright shaping into another shaping just as a cloud changes. But Madoc said nothing about this, either.

He said only, "Do you, who are all-wise, show me that way in which I may win to the accursed witch Ettarre, who has made empty my life, who permits no magnanimities to flourish in my parched heart, and who turns to mockery the noble songs that I write with the quill pen made of a feather from the wing of the Father of All Lies!"

XIV: *How Poets May Reform*

Dame Maya led him to a peaceful place where every kind of domestic animal was dozing in her fine market-garden. Sheep and asses and pigs and oxen and draught-horses all rested comfortably in this peaceful place. They had not any care in the world, and no desires save those which food and sleeping satisfied.

The wise woman said, "Through a magic well known to me, poor Madoc, you may become as one of these, and the skirling music of Ettarre will not trouble you any more."

He asked, "Were these once men?"

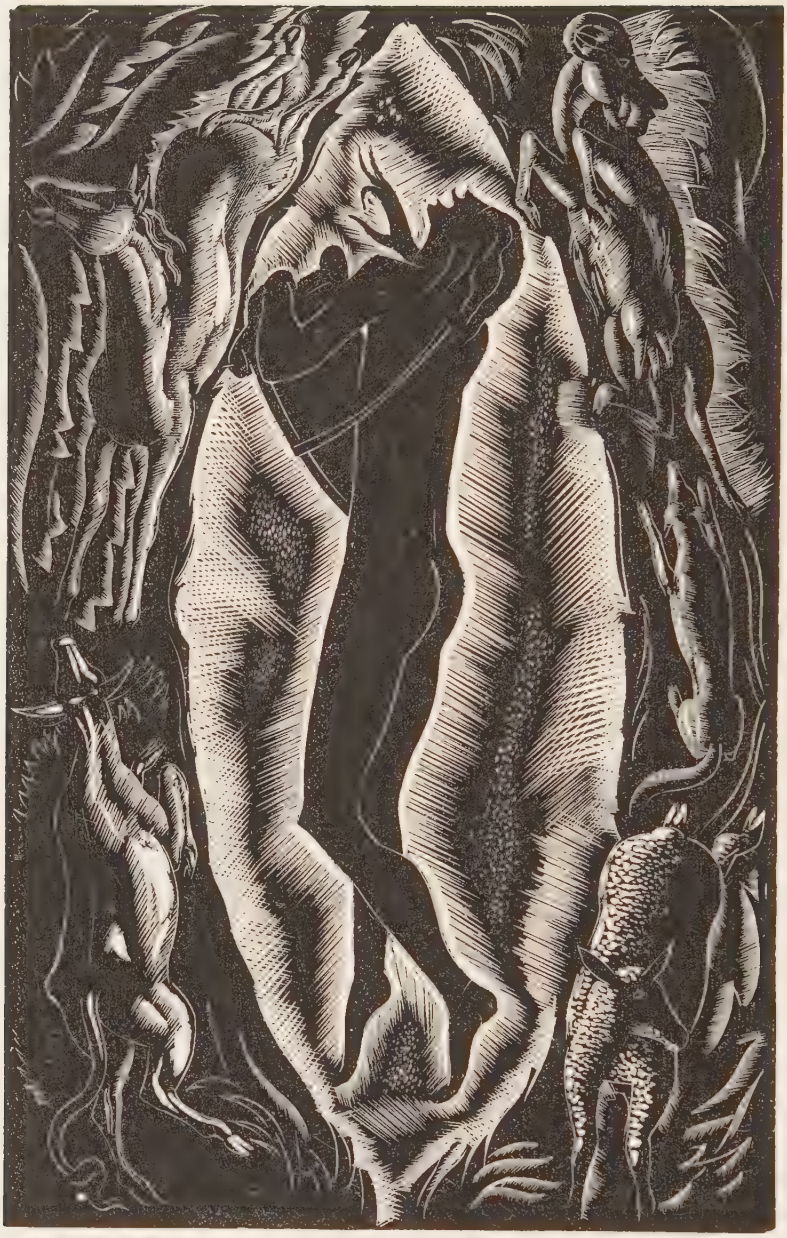
Maya of the Fair Breasts answered him, reassuringly, "Yes: all these quiet and useful creatures were formerly mere poets, troubled as you are now troubled, and all these have I saved from the music that is made in the Waste Beyond the Moon, as presently I will save you."

Madoc cried out, "I do not ask for salvation, but for vengeance!"

She said: "In vengeance there is neither ease nor wisdom. Here are both."

Madoc replied, "Nevertheless, I prefer that you tell me in what way I may come to the accursed witch, and may make an end of her music and of her also."

The beautiful wise woman answered, standing now more near to him, "That way I will not ever tell you, because I like too much your appearance."



. . . bemired and madly aspiring beasts

XV: *Right-Thinking Remedied*

Then Madoc sang yet another of the songs which he had written with the quill from the wing of the Father of All Lies. He sang of how much good there is in even the worst of us, and of the priceless spark of divinity which glows in every human breast and needs but properly to be fostered.

The well-nourished beasts that had been poets once arose forthwith, and each lurched clumsily about upon his hind legs. "Let us be worthy, yet, even yet, of that heritage which we have denied! Let us abandon this wicked market-garden wherein are only ease and gluttony, let us enact new laws, let us discomfort the world's ease everywhere with right-thinking and with every kind of ruthless morality!"

So they babbled and floundered about Madoc, who all the while sang on exaltedly and thought what silly creatures seemed these bemired and madly aspiring beasts. But Dame Maya winced to see her fair name as a wise woman imperilled, now that all her transfigured adorers were in revolt. She hastily told Madoc the way to the Waste Beyond the Moon: he ended his singing: and the domestic animals fell back contentedly into the incurious sloth and the fat ease of the wise woman's market-garden, out of which Madoc passed

toward his allotted

doom.

PART THREE

of Madoc in the Moon

Le chevalier Madoc lui dit : Vous voir est ce qui pouvait m'arriver de plus agréable, et je voudrais être avec vous jusqu'à la mort.

—Cela peut bien être, dit la jeune fille.

XVI: *Leads to the Moon*

All that which Maya of the Fair Breasts had commanded Madoc performed, with his sword and a forked rod and a cup and a five-pointed talisman. This magic brought to him a monster shaped like a feathered lion, but eight times as large, and having the head and wings of a fighting-cock. Upon the breast of the hippogriffin grew red plumage, its back was of a dark blue color, and its wings were white.

Such was the gaily tinted steed upon which Madoc rode, along strange and terrible highways. The spirits of the air beset him: Lilith, that very dreadful and delicious Bride of the Serpent, pursued him a great way, because she liked the appearance of Madoc. Nevertheless, he won unhurt to the pale mists and the naked desert space behind the moon.

Ettarre was at her accursed music: the gray place throbbed with it: it seemed the heart-beat of the universe, and the winds that moved between the stars were attuned to its doubtfulness and discontent.

"Turn, witch, and die!" cried Madoc furiously, as he came toward Ettarre with his sword drawn.

She made an end of her skirling music, she rose, and now for the first time he saw the face of Ettarre. Then Madoc knew it was not hatred that had drawn him to her.

He put her lips away from his lips. Madoc saw that the desert place was changed. About them now was a sylvan paradise: lilies abounded everywhere, and many climbing white roses also were lighted by the clear and tempered radiancy of early dawn. White rabbits were frisking about. Instead of that music which was all a doubtfulness and a discontent, you heard doves calling to their mates.

"Love has wrought this lovely miracle," Ettarre remarked, without any least trace of disapproval.

Madoc replied: "Love has brought beauty into this place. Now also shall love bring liberty to you, and loose you from all bonds excepting only my embraces."

Ettarre answered: "I like your appearance: your embrace is strong and comforting: but there can be no liberty for me until the 725 years of my post-lunar music-making are ended. No man may alter any word of the Norns' decree: and they have decreed that for 725 years my master Sargatanet shall retain me here as his scholar and his prisoner."

Madoc said, jealously: "What else has this Sargatanet taught you save music? No, do you not tell me that, but do you tell me instead the way to this Sargatanet!"

Then Madoc knew it was not hatred

❧ XVIII: *Truisms Come High*

Thereafter hand in hand they passed toward Sargatanet where he sat under the vine which bore fruit of five differing colors. Kneeling before the porphyry throne of Sargatanet were at that instant the five lords of hunger and fire and cold, of darkness and of madness. To each of these he was assigning the vexations to be completed that week.

When his servants had departed earthward, to work the will of Sargatanet among mankind, and to stir up in human hearts the doubtfulness and the discontent which endlessly oppressed the heart of Sargatanet, then the gaunt master of the Waste Beyond the Moon bent down toward where Madoc and Ettarre stood at his ankle. He heard the plea of Madoc, and he heard the threats of Madoc, impartially; and Sargatanet shrugged his winged shoulders.

"That which is written by the Norns," said Sargatanet, "cannot be evaded. The Norns have written this Earth's history, they have recorded its Contents and its Colophon also. No man nor any god may alter any word of that which the Gray Three have written. For one, I would not grieve if such an evasion were possible, because Ettarre has now been my scholar and my prisoner for nearly 600 years. And you know what women are."

XIX: *Love Scores a Point*

Then Sargatanet lifted them 592 feet, and through as many of old years, to the stone table beside his throne; and now before them lay open a book of which the pages were as tall as Sargatanet. This was the book in which the Norns had written the history of this world and all that has been upon Earth and all that will ever be.

"As I was saying," Sargatanet continued, "we know what women are. They, very certainly, do not excel as creative writers. Their imagination needs chastening; their bent is toward the excessively romantic. Thus the gray ladies have written a great deal of nonsense and have permitted entirely too much to hinge upon love-affairs. Nevertheless, no man nor any god may alter any word of the Norns' nonsense, of which all men and gods are a portion. So do these ladies keep the feminine privilege of the last word. And here it is written, plainly enough, that I shall retain Ettarre until the 725 years of her post-lunar music-making are ended."

Madoc walked far up the page to inspect that entry in the giant book. "There is no need," said Madoc, "to alter any word."

With that he took out the quill pen which had fallen from the wing of the Father of All Lies, he stooped, and with this pen Madoc inserted after the digit seven a decimal point.

"There is no need to alter any word."

❧ XX: *The Pen of the Censor*

And then of course—since that which is written in the Book of the Norns must be fulfilled, and figures in particular cannot lie,—then a changing followed, and an obliteration of all which had been since seven years and three months after the beginning of Ettarre's post-lunar imprisonment.

All that had happened and had existed upon Earth during the last 584 years passed very swiftly and confusedly before the eyes of Madoc, as these things swirled backward into oblivion, shepherded by one who rode upon a pale horse. These things became no longer true.

Eighteen generations of mankind and all their blusterings upon land and sea went by young Madoc in the appearance of a sandstorm. Each grain of sand was a town or, it might be, an opulent and famous city, just as that city had been laboriously and painfully builded by eighteen generations of a sovereign people's cluttered, flustered, humdrum, troubleful, lumped hubbub, ungrudged because of that people's high dreams.

All the toil and glory and folly and faith and irrational happiness of the many millions whom Madoc's pen had put out of living had now no longer ever existed, because that which is written in the Book of the Norns must be fulfilled. And it was now written in this book that the bondage of Ettarre should endure for seven and a quarter years.

XXI: *Near Yggdrasill*

Not ever before had anybody essayed to cheat the Norns in quite this fashion: and so, from their quiet studio, by Yggdrasill, the Gray Three noticed this quaint expurgating of their work almost at once.

Verdandi, in fact, took off her reading-glasses so as to observe just what was happening over yonder. "Oh, yes, I see!" she said then, comfortably: "it is a poet altering the history of Earth."

Her sisters glanced up from their writing: and they all smiled. Urdhr remarked, "These poets! they are always trying to escape their allotted doom."

But Skuld looked rather pensively at each of the two other literary ladies before she said, "One almost pities them at times."

Then Urdhr laughed outright. "My darling, you waste sympathy in this sweet fashion because we also are poets, who have written the Earth's Epic. For myself, I grant we made a mistake to put any literary people in the book. Still, it is a mistake to which most beginners are prone: and that story, you must remember, was one of our first efforts. All inexperienced girls must necessarily write balderdash. So we put poets in that book, and death, and God, and common-sense, and I can hardly remember what other incredibilities."

With that, they all laughed again, to think of their art's crude beginnings.

XXII: *The Call of Earth*

"A poet is bold. There is no god in any current mythology who would have made bold to cheat the Norns," said Sargatanet, with odd quietness.

Madoc replied vaingloriously, "My pen is mighty, my pen is equally good at music-making and at arithmetic."

Sargatanet looked for some while, with very pale blue eyes, at the two midgets down there beside his gold-sandaled feet. "Your pen makes music," Sargatanet then said, "such as all men delight in. Yet it cannot make my music. Your pen cannot write down nor can it cancel any line of the music which I eternally devise to be an eternal vexing to every poet, no matter what may be his boldness."

But, in the while that Sargatanet spoke such nonsense, Madoc had uplifted his Ettarre to the back of his hippogriffin. "I have done with all vexations!" Madoc cried out, as the glittering monster spread its huge white wings, and, flapping upward from behind the moon, plunged mightily toward Earth.

Thereafter the hippogriffin went as a comet goes, because its heart remembered that upon this Earth, among the dear hills of Noenhir, were its warm nest builded out of cedar-trees and its loved mate brooding over her agate-colored eggs. And upon the monster's back, exulting Madoc also passed with a high heart, toward his allotted doom.

PART FOUR

of Madoc in the Old Time

Ils vécurent ainsi pendant quelque temps : et la plume noire lui donna de l'argent, du bien, tout ce qu'il faut pour vivre heureux dans le monde. Ensuite le chevalier Madoc partit encore pour voyager.

❧ XXIII: *The Old Time Reiterates*

Thus it was that Madoc and his Ettarre returned to an Earth rejuvenated by Madoc's pen, and lived in the old time which had perished nearly 600 years before the time of Madoc.

Now the Northmen ruled as lords of Noenhir, where the hippogriffin had left its riders. These Northmen were an unsophisticated and hardy people, exceedingly brave and chaste, whose favorite recreations were drunkenness and song-making and piracy.

They welcomed the singer who could make such comfortable and uplifting songs as Madoc wrote with the quill which had fallen from the wing of the Father of All Lies. He sang to them about their own importance, about the excellence of their daily habits, and about the splendid and luxurious future which was in store for their noble Nordic race: he made for them that music which charms mankind in every age and spurs its hearers to magnanimity.

Under their winged helmets the ruddy faces of the attendant pirates were aglow with altruism and kindliness and every manner of virtue. In their thorps and homesteads they welcomed Madoc, and paid him well. So Madoc builded him at Noenhir a fine wooden hall: he and his Ettarre began housekeeping: and Madoc had not anything to trouble him, and his fair wife's embraces were as dear to him as once had been the embraces of Ainath.

XXIV: *Confectioner's Repose*

Madoc had not anything to trouble him. For many years he made his songs, and these songs made his hearers better and more happy. The only difference was that Madoc, now, had invested some little faith in his optimistic and uplifting songs, and much of what they said appeared to him, quite possibly, almost true, here and there.

Madoc lived statelily, with all manner of comfort, in his broad hall, with dragons handsomely painted upon each end of it, and with a stout palisade of oak-logs enclosing everything. The most prominent thieves and cutthroats in the country delighted to hear and to reward the singing of Madoc; Druids had crowned Madoc with the sacred mistletoe as the king of skalds; the fame of Madoc was spread everywhither about the world: and the renowned poet had not anything to trouble him, and no heavier task than to make facile optimistic music.

Ettarre now made no music any more. "How was it that little air of yours used to run, my darling?" her illustrious husband would ask, very carelessly.

And Ettarre would reply: "How can I remember a music I never learned until centuries after this morning? And, besides, what time have I for such fiddle-faddle with all these children on my hands?"

He sang to them about their own importance

❧ XXV: *What Was Not Trouble*

No, Madoc knew, he had not anything to trouble him. You were not really troubled by your vagrant notion that the face of Ainath or the face of Maya, or the more terrible strange pallor of Queen Lilith's face, seemed now and then to be regarding the well-thought-of poet that was Madoc, with a commingling—for so illogical are all day-dreams—of derision and of pity.

Nor could you call it a trouble that, now and then, in such misleading reveries as were apt to visit idle persons when upon the plains and hills of Noenhir the frail tints of spring were resting lightly and so very briefly,—that then the women whom young Madoc had thrust aside because of the magic laid upon the prime of his manhood seemed to have been more dear and more desirable than a mere boy could well appreciate.

Nor was it a trouble—rather it was, when properly regarded, a blessing,—that the one woman you had ever loved was endlessly wrangling nowadays over your meals and the validity of your underclothing, and over the faithlessness of all servants, and over the doings of her somewhat tedious children; and was endowed, nowadays, with that chronic and never wholly smothered dissatisfaction which is everywhere the mark of a competent housekeeper. No,—Madoc knew,—he had not anything to trouble him.

XXVI: *Too Much Is Not Enough*

Meanwhile love's graduates lived with large ease and splendor. About their rheumatic knees were now the flaxen heads of grandchildren: they had broad farmlands, and thralls to do their bidding, and many cattle lowed in their barns. Life had given them all the good things which life is able to give. And Madoc had no desires save those which food and sleeping satisfied, and Madoc now was lean and gray and pompous, and unaccountably peevish also.

He rarely wrote new songs. But everywhere his elder songs were made familiar, in all quarters of the world, by the best-thought-of pirates and sea-rovers, as the sort of thing of which the decadent younger generation was incapable. Everybody everywhere was charmed by their resonant beguilement. Even the most callow poets admitted that with a little more frankness about sexual matters the old fellow would have been passable.

Madoc, in brief, had not any care nor need, nor, it was plain, any contentment. He fell more and more often to asking Ettarre if she could not recollect, just for the fun of the thing, a strain or two of the music from behind the moon with which she had been used to keep him homeless and miserable. And the old lady would tell him more and more pettishly that she had no patience whatever with his nonsense.

XXVII: *The Respectable Gesture*

Then his wife died. She died sedately, with the best medical and churchly aid, and after an appropriate leave-taking of her numerous family. There was a loneliness upon Madoc when he saw her white and shrivelled old body,—so troublingly made strange by the forlorn aloofness of the dead,—lying upon the neat bed among four torches. His loneliness closed over him like a cold flood. He thought confusedly of the great loving which had been between them in their succulent and fiery youth; and of their high adventuring because of a music which was not wholly of this earth; and of the ensuing many years through which a sensible unmoonstruck married couple had shared in all and howsoever trivial matters loyally; and of how those fallen pale lips would not ever find fault with him any more. It was then that he fetched the black pen with which Madoc had written his world-famous songs, and he laid this pen in the cold hand of his Ettarre.

"I call you all to witness," Madoc said then, "that this day has robbed my living of its purpose and of every joy. I call you all to witness that I shall make no more songs now that I have lost my heart's arbiter and my art's arbitrary and most candid critic. Let my fame end with my happiness! Let the provokers of each perish together in the one burning!"

XXVIII: *"This Truly Does Not Die"*

Thereafter Madoc stood beside the funeral pyre. About him were his children and his grandchildren. A company of white-robed boys, from the temple of the local goddess of fertility, were singing what many persons held to be the very noblest of Madoc's many superb songs, the poet's great hymn of human immortality and of the glorious heritage of man that is the ever-living and beloved heir of Heaven.

Four bond-women were killed, and their bodies gracefully arranged about the pyre, with the furnishings of Ettarre's toilet table and her cooking utensils and her sewing implements. Then fire was laid to all. Ettarre's frail aged body was burned so, with the black pen that was in her hand.

The white-robed boys sang very movingly; and they enumerated sweetly, and comfortably, and exultantly, the joys into which this noble and most virtuous lady had entered. But old Madoc heard another music, unheard through all the years in which he had held Ettarre away from her lunar witcheries to be his bedfellow upon Earth: and the bereaved widower shocked everybody by laughing aloud, now that he heard once more the skirling music from behind the moon which, whether it stayed heard or unheard, was decreed to be the vexing of him who had cheated the Norns.

He followed its sweet skirling . . .

XXIX: *Leads to Contentment*

Such was the end of his prosperity and honor, and such was the beginning of his happiness. Old Madoc went now as a vagabond, a trifle crazed, a trifle ragged, but utterly satisfied to follow after that music which none other heard.

Its maker fled always a little before him, inaccessibly: she held before her that with which she made her music, upon no cumbersome bronze harp but upon her heart-strings: her averted face he could not see, nor did he any longer wonder if it were Ettarre or some other who guided him. It was enough that Madoc followed after the music woven out of all doubtfulness and discontent which rang more true than any other music.

He followed its sweet skirling down the lanes and streets in which home-keeping persons chanted the famous songs of Madoc. Everywhere the smiling old wanderer could see his fellows living more happily and more worthily because of the contentedness and the exultant faith which was in these songs.

He was glad that he had made these songs, to be a cordial to guiltless men who had not cheated the Norns. Meanwhile—for him who had outwitted the Gray Three,—there stayed always yonder, always just ahead, another music, which was not wholly of this earth, and which a vagabond alone might be following after always, as was his allotted doom.

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